

A SEISMIC ZONE OF INCONGRUITIES

The installations and drawings by Gregory Maass and Nayoungim documented in this book consist mostly of widening gaps between the constituent parts. They form a seismic zone, riddled with ravines and fissures, eminently unstable cityscapes of found objects, catchy remarks, dumb puns, cartoons, gleefully deliberate ugliness, blunt parody. To the untrained eye, there is very little to keep the whole shebang from falling in over your head, leaving only rubbish. But the installations give the appearance of knowing that you've seen as many bad television shows as they have, and as many commercials, and as many films, and you know that they know, and they know that you know that they know. And they appear to know, and secretly build on a good deal of, say, Neo-Dada and Fluxus and Pop Art, and they have zapped from Concept to Minimal and back, and all that has taught them to keep their formlessness apart from their meaninglessness, making sure that the chasm between the dumb and the ugly is widening, that the real is only suggested, and that your curiosity is getting involved. Perhaps you have been through a moment, as a child in school, when you gave up drawing because cartoons always looked more convincing than anything you yourself could draw. Perhaps you have been to parties where people would tell you the plot of films and television programmes they had seen the other day, instead of telling from their own experience. This art seems to be willing to talk about such moments.

SPONGEBOB FLUXUS

Still, would you really want to go to an art gallery to see ugly brown second-hand chests of draw-

ers installed in combination with toy houses and a toy gas station and wacky little phrases such as "seriously easy going" and "not coming straight to the point"? Would you go to an opening when the invitation card showed a film publicity photo of David Hasselhoff in swimming trunks on the beach, holding cartoon figure SpongeBob SquarePants in the palm of his hand? Yes, really, David Hasselhoff, the actor from the TV series "Baywatch" and "Knight Rider"? Why should the artists expect you to? What is the aesthetic and even contemplative reality of this art, underneath its tremendous surface panache for incongruity and irony?

The photograph of David Hasselhoff looking at SpongeBob SquarePants is a direct (but hardly obvious) reference to art history. The French, Fluxus-affiliated artist and poet Robert Filliou proposed "Art's Birthday" in 1963. He suggested that 1,000,000 years ago, there was no art. But one day, on January 17th to be precise, Art was born. Filliou says it happened when someone dropped a dry sponge into a bucket of water. In 1973, Filliou celebrated the tenth birthday of art's 1.000.000th birthday, and from that year on, the birthday of art has been a yearly occasion for a great diversity of artists. By appropriating the photo of Hasselhoff and Spongebob, publicity material for the feature film "SpongeBob the Movie" (Paramount Pictures/Nickelodeon, 2004) for their invitation, and by calling their show *Two Million Years of Art*, Gregory Maass and Nayoungim have provided the birth of art with a face and a name. Filliou, who lived from 1926 until 1987, can't possibly have been thinking of this combination of cartoon sponge and ham actor when he postulated a birthday for art. (Nayoungim and Maass doubled the age of art from one to two million years "because of the recent discovery of far older humanoid ancestry", a move which simultaneously undermines

Filliou's gesture and yet deals with it as if it had the authority of a scientific finding from the natural history of Homo Sapiens.)

Filliou's instauration of "Art's Birthday" is an ambivalent and troublesome piece of art. On the one hand, it isn't even a piece. Nor is it, for that matter, a poem; it is just a gesture, a grand suggestion, uniting all of mankind in a single history of the imagination while at the same time ignoring completely all established art history, and insisting on an originary myth for art that is painfully dumb and brings art within the reach of anyone who is capable of dropping a sponge in a bucket. And that, it has to be admitted, includes Hasselhoff and his audience. On the other hand, such suggestions or "fluxus pieces" are insidious, like pop tunes with their hook lines they tend to nestle themselves inside the brain, like successful publicity strategies they pop up at unexpected moments, forcing their point of view on the situation. So, of course, there are not only websites for "SpongeBob the Movie" and for David Hasselhoff, but also for "Art's Birthday". Go to www.artsbirthday.net for events and parties now organized each year.

Filliou questioned the status of the artwork and the artworld, always claiming that spontaneity and originality are what really matters in art, often working with cheap materials, leaving his compositions without polish or finishing. With the gift for catchy slogans that characterizes so many artists on the edge of conceptual thought, art and poetry, he came up with what he called the "principle of equivalence", stating that "well-made", "poorly made", "not made" are equivalents in art. It follows that for Filliou, art is firmly lodged in the domain of the hypothetical and the imaginary. That this is so, is also demonstrated by his firm insistence that everybody is an artist, and that it is the task of the artist to demonstrate that; a conviction which he also expressed in the formula "art is what makes life more interesting than art". Art, for Filliou, can change the world by demonstrating the universal reality of the imagination. He sought to make works of the greatest possible simplicity, looking for a language that is universally understood.

UNIVERSAL INSINUATION, UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

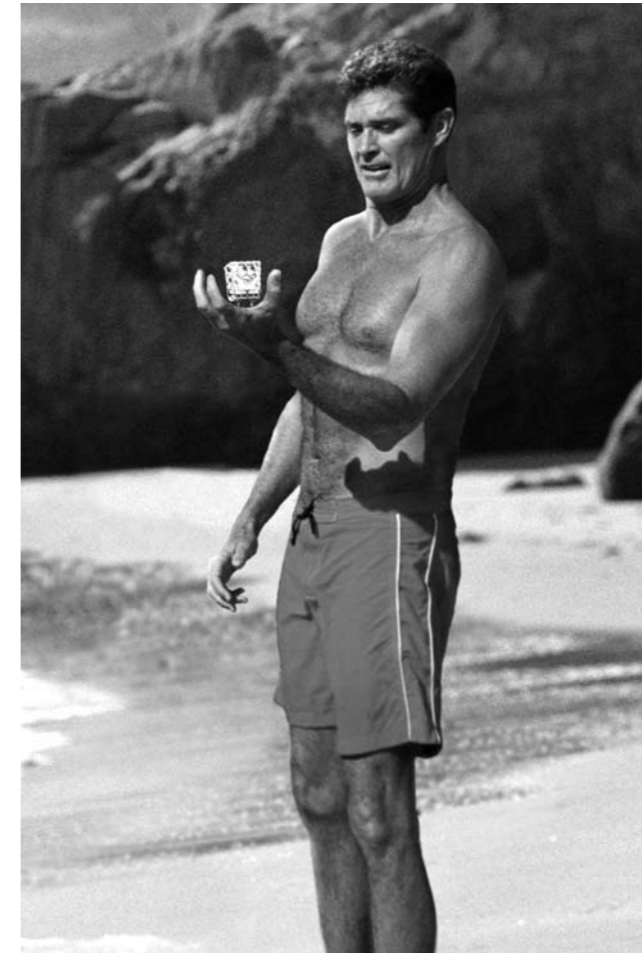
It isn't hard to see that the work of Nayoungim and Maass is riddled with forms of language and code. Once you start looking for them, the question is rather where to stop. Language insinuates itself everywhere, initiating all kinds of metaphorical readings and misreadings.

In the *Handsome Tofu* show (Assen, The Netherlands, 2007), tofu acts as body double for the sponge, proving its ability to soak up countless tastes, shapes and meanings. Tofu's flexible and adaptive qualities are celebrated by a key piece for the show, the *TOFU flow chart*, a hand-embroidered banner which showcases the artistic methodology of Nayoungim and Gregory S. Maass. The flow chart unapologetically diagrams the connections between (among others) Zen, the sublime, creativity, visions, goodness, the artists themselves, entertainment, kiwi's, science-fiction — pointing to tofu as the final outcome, the crème de la crème, nutritious symbol of symbols.

Tofu is also the underlying structure of a sculpture that resembles nothing so much as a bunch of cheap old kitchen-sink cabinets. The viewer may well wonder on which side of the sink the refrigerator should go (the inevitable IKEA question) before noticing that the plastic laminate boards actually form the letters T—O—F—U.

The sculptural installation *The mad hatter*, a character from Alice in Wonderland, is on one level a recreation of a Japanese-style tofu dish, in which the tofu, once again, is made out of plastic laminate, while the bean sauce is represented by hats. The acrylic body of an electric guitar is completed by having a French baguette stand in for the neck. The tasteful tableau is completed by autumn leaves (plastic) hanging from the ceiling; this being standard decoration in Japanese supermarkets (information courtesy of the artists).

In an earlier show (Bergen, Norway, 2007), Maass and Nayoungim had already tested and approved of the shape-shifting potential of tofu, by making a collection of small tofu box-like assemblages, which might or might not be scaled down models of mainframe computers, suprematist skyscrapers, and satellites. All these



Right: A production still from "The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie" (2004) turned invitation to Maass and Nayoungim's 2008 exhibition *Two Million Years of Art* at the Künstlerhaus in Solothurn, Switzerland.



**KIM KIM
GALLERY**

subjects, computers, skyscrapers, and satellites, had figured in their work before. Fixing these tofu replicas on top of an appropriated Coca-Cola refrigerator may have served simply to add a bit of extra relish to the show, or to add a whiff of East (tofu) meets West (coke), or even to insinuate the biography of Robert Filliou, who worked for Coca-Cola in the US before he worked for the UN in Korea (where tofu is the national dish) and immersed himself deeply in the teachings of Zen buddhism.

Maass and Nayoungim's 2008 shows *Two Million Years of Art* and *Don't Hassel the Hof*, respectively in Solothurn, Switzerland, and Galerie Agnès B., Paris, both play with the substitution of Hasselhoff for Filliou, respectively for the man who gives birth to art. Each letter of Hasselhoff's name is represented individually by a catchy little phrase, organized in the shape of a capital H, A, S, E, L, O, or F. Each catchphrase in turn is upbeat to the point of being self-contradictory: "yes way" instead of "no way", "seriously easygoing", "you had me at hello". (This last phrase, so the artists informed me, they remembered vaguely, perhaps mistakenly, from an early Woody Allen comedy—*Annie Hall*?—where it was or wasn't pronounced by "a full-fledged nymphomaniac whose erotic phantasy is to be raped by strangers while collecting money for the Salvation Army in New York apartment buildings".)

The phrase "Don't Hassel the Hof" was found by the artists on a David Hasselhof-fan t-shirt. Maass and Nayoungim got some extra mileage out of this play of words by taking the word "Hof" to stand for "farm", as it does in German, representing this by model farmhouses, exhibited in a landscape of not-too-alluring brown tables, cupboards and chests of drawers. The phrase "She'll be alright", is installed, without any need for transliteration, with a model Shell gas station, exhibited next to the farms.

Other installations in these shows are derived from Hasselhoff's role as lifeguard in "SpongeBob the Movie". The film scene in which SpongeBob has to jump from one of Hasselhoff's legs to the other to escape from a cartoon headhunter, performing this James Bond-like act of daring athleticism while Hasselhoff is body-skiing through the surf, is represented in the part of an installation of a papier maché island with a

blue plasticine foot of Hasselhoff surfing through spray water. (Once again, background information provided by the artists.)

There is also a snowman-like sculpture made out of blankets and various tissues, inspired by similar snowmen discovered by Maass and Nayoungim to be part of the folklore of (guaranteed snow-free) Florida. The snowman may or may not refer to Hasselhoff, Squarebob, Filliou, and sponges. It refers with certainty to imaginary representations of the human figure, and for better or worse, it represents the eternal rebirth of art.

Another show, in the Market Gallery in Glasgow in 2008, introduces the "Kim Kim gallery". "Kim Kim" answers and echoes Glasgow's "Mary Mary" gallery for contemporary art. The show itself consists simply of the letters K, I, and M, built of great sheets of plywood, each letter brightly lit by its own lights, empty billboards announcing nothing more than their own tautological presence. The scaffolding that supports these letters is draped with long folds of wallpaper with an arcadian motif. These folds of wallpaper are punched in a systematic fashion, like the now outdated punchcards that were used some thirty years ago to feed encoded data into computers.

Kim Kim Gallery also has an internet existence; see www.kimkingallery.com. Nayoungim and Maass use it as a magnet to attract other artists with a most independent mind. Kim Kim Gallery may also, one of these days, develop into an actual gallery.

If these shows do not quite live up to Filliou's demand for art as a universal language, they certainly do exhibit a willingness to employ all kinds of materials to warp each other's meaning into metaphorical status. Nothing is left quite as it was before. Each presumably stable form of language is slightly tilted, at least for the duration of the show. Tables represent mountains, but only "as if": they are still, ostensibly, just tables. Plywood and wooden slats make billboards and road signs, but only as long as you're willing to play. Each piece grinds your nose in the reality of the reservoir of imaginary meanings that everyone carries around with him. If the work of Nayoungim and Maass is, like Filliou's, looking for a language that is universally understood, it does so by exploring the detour through the imagination, accepting that the history

Top left: Inauguration of the Kim Kim Gallery at the Market Gallery in Glasgow, Scotland. (2008) Bottom: Logo for KimKim Gallery, designed by Gregory Maass & Nayoungim.

of mankind's imagination is not without a good dose of flukes and blunders.

CARTOON DIAGRAMS

Next to SpongeBob SquarePants and David Hasselhoff, several drawings in the *Two Million Years of Art* and *Don't Hassel the Hof* shows contain a figure that is known as the duck/rabbit. It is a cartoon drawing that can be seen either as the head of a duck or as the head of a rabbit. This cartoon has become unusually famous in intellectual circles, since both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ernst Gombrich have used it in their books.

Wittgenstein used the duck/rabbit in his "Philosophical Investigations" to further his anti-illusory explanation of the workings of language and perception. In his older "Logical-Philosophical Treatise", he had already mentioned a geometrical figure, a cube or dice that can be seen in two ways, with either the square $a-a-a-a$ or $b-b-b-b$ coming to the front (it can also, easily, in some contexts inevitably, be seen as a square sponge). At this moment in his philosophical development, Wittgenstein was firmly convinced that language, to be meaningful, must be organized according to purely logical rules. Later in his life, the duck-rabbit cartoon was to him but a more intricate version of the geometrical cube, a more natural and real-life version of the same ambivalent figure, useful as a more demanding test for his approach to the philosopher's stone, Universal Language, since the duck/rabbit shows how pure logic is mixed in with the psychological realities of context-based expectations.

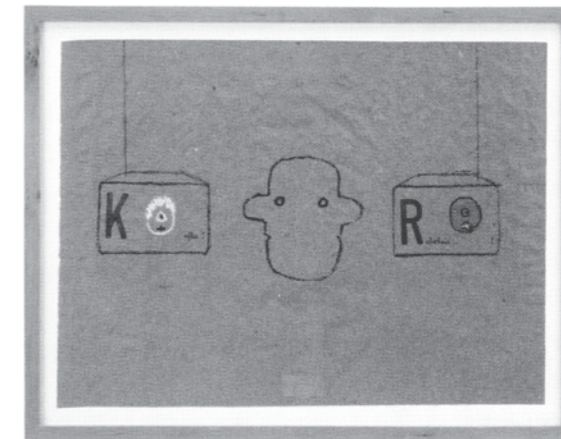
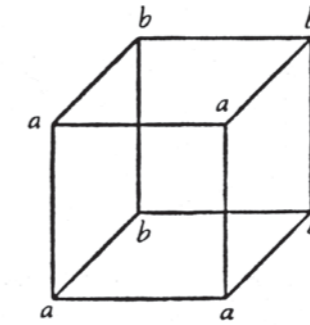
Ernst Gombrich used the selfsame duck/rabbit cartoon as a basic example of art's magical potential to create illusions. This cartoon, made up for the purpose of having two equally convincing meanings, demonstrates the mechanism of illusion; according to Gombrich, "we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion." As Gombrich explains, "Ambiguity—rabbit or duck?—is clearly the key to the whole problem of image reading. For as we have seen, it allows us to test the idea that such interpretation involves a tentative projection, a trial shot which transforms the image if it turns out to be a hit. It is just because we are so well trained in this game and miss so rarely that we are not often aware of

this act of interpretation." And Gombrich reminds his readers that "Representation is always a two-way affair. It creates a link by teaching us how to switch from one reading to another."

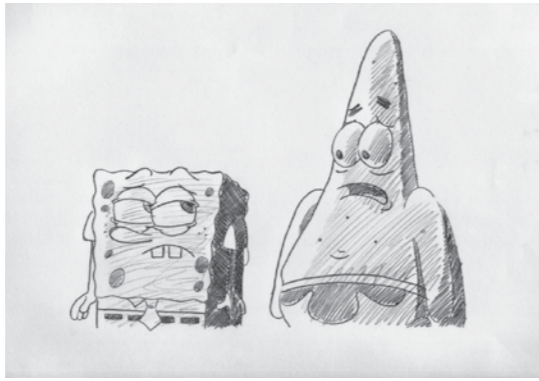
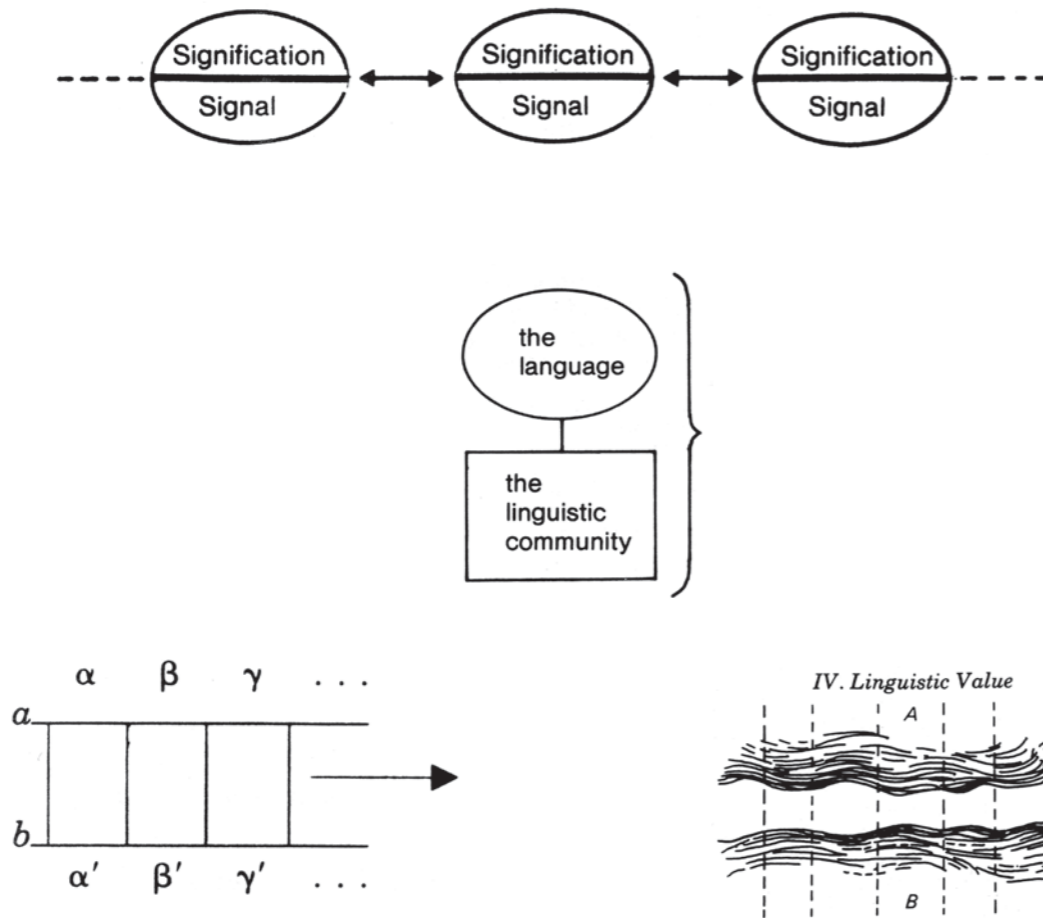
The anonymous artist who came up with the drawing of the duck/rabbit (it appeared in 1892 in the German humor magazine *Fliegende Blätter*) probably understood this very well when he gave his cartoon the caption "Which animals resemble each other most closely?", and answered with "ducks and rabbits".

If this cartoon has become, in the able hands of Wittgenstein and Gombrich, a diagram that represents and explains the seemingly universal mechanism of interpretation, it may also be used to represent the opposite notion. That is the possibility that all diagrams that claim to represent universal language may also be seen as cartoons. Wittgenstein himself demonstrated in his late work that his early "Treatise" definitely had something of a cartoon in its insistence on postulating a single logical structure for valid language as such. Perhaps Wittgenstein's work itself (often addressed as the ambivalent combination of "Wittgenstein I" and "Wittgenstein II") is something of a duck/rabbit. Wittgenstein never could let go of the burning desire for a final release from ambivalence. His philosophical work symbolizes the uncertain status of the centuries-long project to connect language without ambivalence to extra-linguistic realities, to create a universal language by eliminating all suggestion and projection from language. It is a project that has produced many riddles and iridescent bubbles shimmering with a bright new world.

Another diagram that may easily be (mis)taken for a cartoon is Ferdinand de Saussure's sketch which illustrates the "mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions, and a language takes shape". Saussure is the founding father of semiotics, the science of linguistic signs. His work has contributed a great deal to the belief that systematic analysis is universally applicable to language. Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics" is full of seductively clear diagrams, in which signal and signification are neatly separated in adjoining boxes, or shown to be related to each other like the letters of the Greek alpha-



Clockwise, from top left: The duck/rabbit drawing from Ernst Gombrich; the cube/dice from Wittgenstein's *Treatise*; the duck/rabbit diagram from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*; one of Robert Filliou's *Video Models* (1969).



bet. Elsewhere in the book, the tricky issue of how “the language” and “the linguistic community” are connected is solved visually with a single accolade plus a tiny, well, connecting line.

The central diagram in Saussure’s book, the key to the crucial riddle of language, the connection of ideas and sounds, labours to obtain a similar clarity, but doesn’t quite succeed. Saussure puts forward that “In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate.” He adds that “The substance of sound is no more fixed or rigid than that of thought.” How to connect these two in a convincing manner? Saussure simply postulates that “One might think of it as being like air in contact with water: changes in atmospheric pressure break up the surface of the water into series of divisions, i.e. waves. The correlation between thought and sound, and the union of the two, is like that.” But isn’t it only in cartoons that a storm at sea can result in waves in the water that are mirrored directly by waves in the air or in the clouds? And yet Saussure’s seascape sketch, aided by the letters A and B and a few dotted lines, successfully pulls off a confidence trick, and allows the reader/viewer to think that this comparison indeed explains how language takes shape. But does the diagram really provide a scientific clarification of the origin of language? Isn’t it remarkably similar to the older assertion that the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters? Or, to put this diagram to another test, if someone wanted to throw a sponge into Saussure’s water, how would he be able to distinguish air from water, how could he tell these twins apart?

A third, older example offers itself to be added to these two attempts to discover the universal truth about language. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, German musician-scientist Ernst Chladni discovered what he called *Klangfiguren* or sound-figures. Chladni found that he could use a violin bow on a metal or glass plate covered with sand. The oscillations in the plate would produce many attractive symmetrical figures in the sand, most figures made up of curves, some of straight lines. As these figures corresponded to specific tones, they were understood by Chladni’s audiences to be both natu-

ral and symbolic at the same time. It was as if musical tones had drawn their own pictograms, hieroglyphs, or letters in the sand. These sound-figures were seen by many scientists, poets and philosophers as a very strong indication that nature itself consisted of language, a language that lay waiting just under Nature’s surface to be translated and understood. Johann Ritter, a scientist who did pioneering work on electricity and a contemporary of Chladni’s, speculated on the deeper meanings of electrical and acoustical oscillations, thinking they lay at the bottom of every sensorial experience, including light (“visible tone”), sound (“audible light”), smell, taste, and all feeling. According to Ritter, Chladni’s figures made clear what sound-figures mean to our inner life: light-figures, fire-script. According to Ritter, every sound-figure was also an electrical figure, and every electrical figure corresponded to a sound-figure.

It doesn’t take much thought to realize that Chladni’s figures, however fascinating, do not present an actual language. On the other hand, the insights that Chladni, Ritter and their co-workers gave in the possibilities for transforming and transmitting oscillations of all kinds have in the long run resulted in the invention of telephones, gramophones, radio. They prefigure all the media that are now used to make language circulate universally, developments that figure large in the natural history of mankind’s imaginative uses of language.

Ever since Chladni travelled across Europe to demonstrate his sound-figures, romantic philosophers have employed his *Klangfiguren* to speculate on the relationship between language and nature. Chladni and Ritter can be found in the works of Novalis, Friedrich Nietzsche and even Walter Benjamin, who all thought of their scientific speculations on the natural origins of language as highly stimulating. Novalis, who knew Ritter personally, wrote in his philosophical novel *The Novices at Sais* about the tantalizing perspective on language opened by Ritter and Chladni: “Men travel in manifold paths: who so traces and compares these, will find strange Figures come to light; Figures which seem as if they belonged to that great Cipher-writing which one meets with everywhere [...] In such Figures one anticipates the key to that wondrous Writing, the grammar of it; but this Anticipation will not

Top down: Four Saussurian diagrams: three elliptical shapes divided horizontally, to produce a chain of signification/signal units; a diagram of ‘the language/the linguistic community’; diagram of a sound sequence; the sea/wind thought/sound diagram. Bottom: Gregory Maass & Nayoungim, *An Awkward Moment*, (2008).

fix itself into shape, and appears as if, after all, it would not become such a key for us.”

Friedrich Nietzsche associated Chladni's sound-figures with artistic creative forces. He used the *Klangfiguren* to voice his opinion that the artistic potential to create shapes isn't quite free and arbitrary. Just as Chladni's sound-figures are related to the sound itself, so are artistic images connected to an underlying activity of the nervous system, which Nietzsche thought of as an utterly tender oscillating and trembling.

Walter Benjamin, last not least, was impressed by Ritter's speculations. To Ritter, *Klangfiguren* plus electricity suggested the interconnectedness of spoken and written language, music, architecture, sculpture and art, plus their belonging to the divine language of natural creation. Nothing less bold could, according to Benjamin, do full justice to the symbolic vigor of language. The sound-figures suggest that even what hasn't been written may some day become legible.

A PLUNGE INTO SUGGESTION

In the natural history of mankind's imagination, never have so much language, imagery and music been transmitted as today. This may mean that our intuitive forces have become bloated like an over-saturated sponge. It may also mean that the imagination of our generation is better trained than that of any earlier generation, swollen like the physique of a body-building movie actor. Can we even distinguish whether we are passive subjects in this process, or have some power of agency? Can we tell, having been brought up on television and games, what their influence means to us?

According to Gombrich, we have to accept that we are, all of us, both sponge and artist: "Representation is always a two-way affair. It creates a link by teaching us how to switch from one reading to another."

By their blunt disregard for surface harmony, their aggressive reappropriations and their unusual combinations of stuff from all walks of life, Maass and Nayoungim trace formerly unknown faultlines in mankind's imagination. They do not plead "All power to the imagination", but dem-

onstrate a few of the irksome powertricks that suggestion has up its sleeve. Their installations may not propose a fresh diagram for a Universal Language, they certainly are an eloquent advocate for universal suggestibility, celebrating the weird happenstances that accompany so many attempts to give meaning.

SOURCES

For the duck/rabbit in Wittgenstein, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984; pp. 64-5 and 519-28.

For the duck/rabbit in Gombrich, see Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*. London: Phaidon, 2005; pp 5; 198; 203.) See also: <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/images/Jastrow/JastrowDuckFliegende.jpg>

For the thought/sound diagram in Saussure, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 111. Cf. also, for an admittedly vague link between this Saussurian diagram and Duchamp's Large Glass, <http://www.toutfait.com/duchamp.jsp?postid=1325>

Benjamin on Johann Ritter's speculative views on language: Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982; p. 189-190.

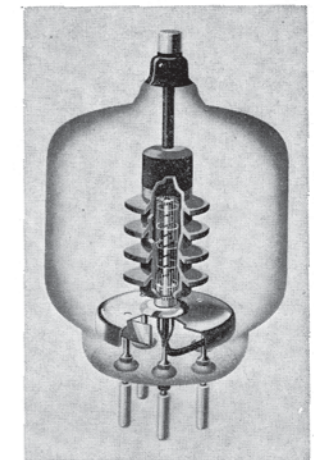
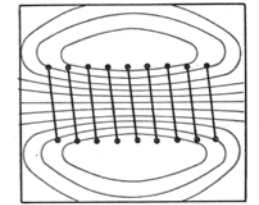
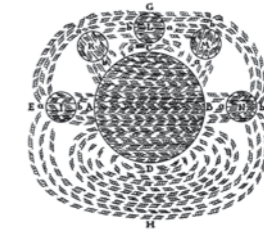
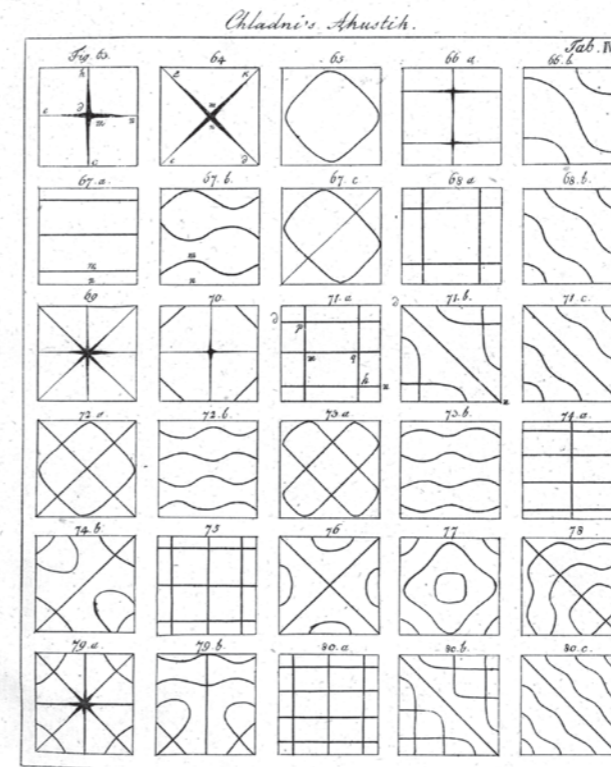
Filliou, Robert. Video Models (1969), in: Pérez-Oramas, Luis. *An Atlas of Drawings: Transforming Chronologies*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

Nietzsche mentions Chladni in his *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* as well as in some fragments; for those, see <http://thenietzschechannel.fws1.com/nacha19.htm>.

Nayoungim and Gregory S. Maass, *Warped Flow Gadget*. Introductory essay "Warped Flow Gadget" by Sytze Steenstra. Seoul, 2007.

Louise Fabian: Novalis' Combinatorial Poetics. <http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/11/04fabian>

Chladni's sound figures: SICD Universities of Strasbourg <http://num-scd-ulp.u-strasbg.fr:8080/>



Clockwise from top left: A selection of Chladni's Klangfiguren; a diagram of magnetism (possibly drawn by Descartes) and of electromagnetic force fields (from a physics textbook); drawing of a radiotube; a Peter Arno cartoon from the 1940's, depicting a magician picketing the RCA radio building (then the center of U.S. broadcasting) with a sign that reads "unfair to organized magicians".